

in heaven. Why? Because the child is morally innocent, he or she is without sin. Hell is a place of punishment for our sins. Sin is to be in opposition against God. A little child is not capable of opposing God, of rebelling against Him. Moreover, when someone states that the child is child is condemned to hell for the sin of the parent(s), we must remember that **Ezekiel 18:20** states that we are individually responsible for our sins. Should a child die, the child is morally innocent and is immediately in paradise (i.e., heaven). When King David grieved the death of his child born to him as a result of committing adultery with Bathsheba, David said that the child would not “come to me, but I will go to the child” (see **2 Samuel 12:23**), meaning that the child had died and returned to God, the Giver of life. In turn, David would someday die and return to God. Finally, we must emphasize that Jesus had a great heart for little children, and we can rest assured that the compassion of Jesus Christ would extend to morally innocent little ones (see **Matthew 18:1-10, Mark 10:13-16**).

Yet, for the most part, we do not die in our childhood. But rather, we grow up and reach the age of accountability (see bottom left-side circle). This is not a set age chronologically for all people. It is reached at various times in people’s lives when the individual recognizes there is a difference between moral right and wrong. A child’s environment while growing up will have a significant impact as to when this realization is reached. The person will have an understanding that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (see **Romans 3:23**). In **John 16:8**, we read that the Holy Spirit convicts the world in regard to sin, righteousness and judgment to come, and every person falls under this conviction—even those who deny the existence of God.

It is at this moment in life when the person realizes that there are consequences for his or her actions. If the individual does not acknowledge God and rejects a relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and should the individual die, hell is experienced (see bottom circle). In many respects, the reality of **Romans 6:23** is experienced in that “the wages of sin is death.” But, rather than focus on the “bad news,” there is “good news” in that Jesus Christ is “the way, the truth, and the life” in order for us to be restored to God, our Creator (see **John 14:6**).

Looking at the center of the circles, a cross can be drawn to represent going through Christ to God in heaven. Beginning at the “age of accountability circle,” we can draw a set of stairs to represent the path by which we are led to God by means of salvation in Christ. On the first step, we begin with belief. It is essential to believe in Jesus Christ (see **John 3:16**). The phrase “whosoever

believes” John 3:16 means that an individual continues in belief as the word “believe” is in the present tense of Greek, meaning the action of belief continues and does not cease. Belief in Jesus Christ is foundational to a relationship with God. Just as we begin building a house by laying the foundation, we begin building a relationship with God by laying a foundation of belief in Christ.

Next, moving up the stairs, we find that it is essential to **repent** of our sins (see **Acts 2:38, Acts 26:20**). Repentance was an important element in the preaching ministry of Jesus Christ. Like two book ends, the ministry of Jesus is marked with preaching repentance at both its beginning and end (see **Matthew 4:17 and Luke 24:47**). Repentance is not living a perfect life morally, but it is a changed life spiritually. We are to “hunger and thirst after righteousness” (see **Matthew 5:6**), which means that we are to have an “appetite” for holiness. That happens when we have a change of attitude, a change of thinking. Repent is the word *metanoia* in Greek, which is a compound word of *meta* (meaning change) and *noia* (meaning mind). Hence, if we “change our minds, change the way we think,” there is greater likelihood of changing the way we act. Ergo, we repent. This is a deliberate decision and act of the will that is essential in the process of coming to God.

As we move along this “stairway to heaven,” we discover that it is essential to make what is called the good **confession** (i.e., to go public with one’s decision to be a Christian). This is articulated well in **Romans 10:9**, in that if we **believe** in our hearts that God raised Jesus from the dead, and we **confess** with our mouths that Jesus is Lord, we will be saved. In **Matthew 10:32-33**, Jesus said He will acknowledge us before His Father in heaven if we acknowledge Him before others. We cannot be ashamed of Jesus Christ! Once we make a public decision for Christ, such as during an altar call at the conclusion of a worship service. Moreover, this is not a “one time” moment of going public with one’s faith. We believe that a person must be ready and willing to admit in many settings that one is a Christian (i.e., at school, in a family setting, at work, etc.).

Baptism is yet another important moment in one’s spiritual journey of salvation. There are many verses that make mention of baptism in the New Testament. For example, Jesus said that whoever believes and is baptized will be saved (see **Mark 16:16**). Paul mentioned that baptism is a “burial” of our old self and we are raised to a new life in Christ (see **Romans 6:1-4, Colossians 2:12**). As well, Jesus Himself instituted this sacrament when He was baptized (see **Matthew 3:13-17**). Baptism is NOT to be interpreted as a “work” for earning one’s salvation. When a person is being baptized, he or she is not doing

anything. Rather, the individual is allowing something to be done to him or to her. This is seen in the **passive voice** of the word “baptize” -- passive meaning to allow something to be done to you.

Also, it is important to note who is a candidate to be baptized. When Jesus said whoever believes and is baptized will be saved (Mark 16:16), He taught us that an individual must have the ability to mentally believe in the person of Jesus Christ. Moreover, **Acts 2:38** states that we are to repent and be baptized to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Hence, a candidate to be baptized must have the ability to repent (i.e., “change the mind” and behavior). This clearly indicates that infants and toddlers are not candidates for baptism. Infant baptism and infant sprinkling came into vogue long after the early Church was established.

The mode of baptism expanded to include infant or adult sprinkling (Greek *rantidzo*), pouring (Greek *ekcheo*), or immersion (Greek *baptidzo*). Yet, only *baptidzo* appears in the Greek New Testament manuscript, even though both *ekcheo* and *rantidzo* were available in the first century Greek vocabulary. Also, our Bibles use a transliteration of the word “baptism” when the Greek word in the text means literally “immerse or dip.” Acts 2:38 literally reads, “Repent and be immersed...” The use of the transliteration allows people to define the mode of baptism according to their wishes, even though the Greek word means to immerse. If there were other forms of baptism practiced in the first century church, it is reasonable to think that such terminology would appear in the New Testament. Moreover, only immersion “fits” the Biblical imagery of going down into the water, coming up out of the water, being buried (see **Romans 6:4, Colossians 2:12**). Keep in mind that baptism is a sacrament that reminds us visually that Jesus died for our sins and was raised from the dead (i.e., a burial and resurrection).

There are individuals today who teach that an individual is saved merely by believing in Christ (i.e., by faith only). They will base this on **John 3:16** and/or **Acts 16:31**. This is further reinforced with the use of what is commonly called “the sinner’s prayer,” a prayer that was developed by American evangelists from the late eighteenth century. Yet, throughout the book of Acts we do not see a person “believing and saying the sinner’s prayer.” We see something vastly different. Believe—or faith only—was “disconnected” from other essential elements of coming to salvation. It is obvious that people repented and turned to God (**Acts 3:19**). They openly and publicly confessed Christ. Moreover, they were immediately baptized. They did not postpone being baptized in order to

take a three-month class preparing them spiritually to be baptized. Nor did they diminish the role of baptism in coming to Christ.

Over and again, people came to believe that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, and they were immediately baptized. This is consistently the pattern (See **Acts 2:40-41—believers on the Day of Pentecost; 8:12—Philip in Samaria; 8:35-37—Philip and the Ethiopian; 9:17-18—the Apostle Paul’s conversion; Acts 10:44-48—Cornelius and others; Acts 16:14-15—Lydia and her household; Acts 16:30-33—the Philippian jailer and his household; Acts 18:8—Paul in Corinth; Acts 19:1-5—Paul in Ephesus; Acts 22:16—Paul’s testimony of his conversion**). The New Testament Church clearly did not teach a “faith only” doctrine, but they practiced the importance of belief, repentance, confession and baptism in the salvation moment.

As well, the early Church taught that there was one baptism (see **Ephesians 4:4-6**), not multiple baptisms. When a person is baptized, the individual “puts on Christ,” and is clothed in a “robe of righteousness” see **Galatians 3:26-27, Isaiah 61:10**) that only Christ can provide. Our sins are forgiven—washed away in the moment of baptism by the blood of Christ (see **Acts 2:38, 22:16**)—not only in the past and the present, but also all future sins are forgiven because we are “clothed with Christ in baptism.” There is no need to be repeatedly baptized with every sin we commit. Moreover, there is no second baptism in terms of a baptism of the Holy Spirit. When we believe, repent, confess and are baptized, we are baptized in the Holy Spirit in that we receive Him as a gift from God (see **Acts 2:38**), for there is “one baptism.”

Finally, it is important to make a lifelong **commitment** to follow Christ. In **Revelation 2:10b** we are told to “be faithful to the point of death” and we will be given the crown of life. This phrase can be interpreted in two ways: we can be faithful until drawing our last breath in our old age, or we can be faithful to the point of being willing to die for our faith in Christ (i.e., being martyred).

When we enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ, we become a part of the body of Christ—the Church (represented by the upper right circle). While in the Church, we grow in spiritual maturity (see **II Peter 3:18**). We minister to one another in the different seasons of life (see **Romans 12:15**). We worship/learn together, pray together, fellowship together, and remember the Lord’s death together (see **Acts 2:42**). Being a part of the Church should be a life-changing experience in community.

Then, when we die, we are ushered into heaven (represented by the top circle) by the grace and mercy of God! Much like the Apostle Paul, we are then able to say, "I have fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith. Now there is in store for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but to all who have longed for His appearing" (see **II Timothy 4:7-8**). We then spend all of eternity with the Lord—in paradise!

Yet, there remains an unidentified "circle" (see bottom right). We could label this circle "apostasy." Apostasy is a rejection of one's beliefs. Just as a person has free will in accepting Christ, an individual has free will to reject Jesus Christ. This is a most serious state in which to be, and it is reached only after a person allows his or her heart to become hard and calloused towards God. There are verses in the Scriptures that make mention of apostasy (see **Hebrews 3:12, 6:4-6, 10:26; I Timothy 4:1 et al**). Should a person die in this state (i.e., having rejected Jesus Christ as Savior), the individual will experience hell and the wrath of God for he or she no longer has Christ.

Looking at this chart, we clearly know that we are not in the "hereafter." Rather, we are in the "here-and-now." Moreover, we can only be in one place at one time. Where are you? Where am I in this journey with Christ? A **challenge...**"X" marks the spot. Place an "X" on the diagram representing where you currently see yourself spiritually. After doing so, is there a need to be "moving on down the road" spiritually? Is it time to finally believe in Christ? Is it time to repent and turn from sin? Is it time to go public with a decision for Christ? Is it time to be baptized into Christ? "X" marks the spot.

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